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Date: Wednesday, May 24, 1978

Subject: Human Rights and United States Relations with Argentina

Participants: Brigadier General Orlando Agosti, Commander-in-Chief of the Air Force  
David D. Newsom, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs  
Ambassador Raul Castro  
Fernando Rondon

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The Undersecretary said that he is here to improve relations in a land where the three military services are important. As you know, Mr. Newsom said, there are problems in how Argentina is seen from the United States and these problems create political circumstances which make it difficult to have cooperative relationships. I came here, Mr. Newsom continued, because the President and the Secretaries of State and Defense asked me to. We recognize how difficult the struggle has been against terrorism, and that the Argentine government has taken steps to improve the human rights situation in the country. We are here to see how the future looks so that we may know whether we will be able to justify the sale of military training and spare parts. The Undersecretary noted that there is a certain amount of opposition in the Congress to such sales because of human rights. He referred to the good talks with President Videla and the Interior and Foreign Ministers. While there are many positive signs, Mr. Newsom went on, there is one question which bothers me, and although I realize it is not in your area, it is certainly of interest to you because it affects the Air Force. My problem is the continued uncertainty over the fate and ultimate release of large numbers of persons detained under the state of emergency. I would appreciate your views on how you see the gradual return to normalcy, including the question of executive detainees.

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General Agosti recalled briefly some of the problems Argentina has gone through and reiterated the government's intention to restore representative, federal democracy. He was not responsive to the Undersecretary's specific questions.

Mr. Newsom referred to the upcoming full assumption of the Presidency by General Videla, who would be giving up his role as army commander. He asked if there are any other basic changes contemplated in this connection. For example, whether there might be a change in the state of siege and whether the military government could operate without state of siege powers.

Agosti responded that the three members of the junta would be stepping down shortly. The navy commander would probably retire around October 1. Agosti, who said he is the most junior member of the junta, would retire by March 24, 1979. He said there are no other major changes envisioned. With respect to the state of siege, Agosti said it could be lifted without any effect on the junta's ability to rule. He did not, however, suggest that any lifting of the state of siege was being given any kind of consideration.

The Undersecretary expressed his recognition of the problem of pending military orders, and inquired whether there is any materiel which has a very high priority.

Agosti answered that spare parts are important because Argentina's Air Force consists primarily of American aircraft and if spare parts are not available, new purchases will have to be made in Europe.

Ambassador Castro stated his concern about the lack of a clear idea of what is happening to the 1,200 detainees who are not being brought to trial. The Ambassador said this will be very hard to explain at home, unless there is a clear program for the release for trial of large numbers.

Agosti replied that all prisoners would be judged, given the right of option or released, and that a committee is reviewing this problem on a case by case basis.

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